



Family

LA DOLCE GILDA

The documentary 'Love, Gilda' makes us miss Gilda Radner—and all her beloved 'Saturday Night Live' characters—even more

By **Marjorie Ingall**

May 14, 2018 • 12:00 AM



“We are excited to storm and get inside,” a 23-year-old Gazan named Mohammed Mansoura, **told** the *Washington Post* yesterday. “When asked what he would do inside Israel,” the newspaper reported, “he said, ‘Whatever is possible, to kill, throw stones.’”

When Israel withdrew every last soldier and settler from the Gaza Strip in 2005, only the most hardened and bitter cynics predicted that the end of Israel’s occupation of 1.3 million Palestinians would bring even greater misery to Palestinians and Israelis alike. After all, the man who led the withdrawal, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was hardly a naive peacenik. The only way things could possibly get worse in Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal, even sober-minded people reasoned, would be if the Palestinians themselves chose leaders who were determined to sacrifice the welfare of every single person living in Gaza to a hopeless yet continuing campaign of cross-border terror against Israel.

Absurd, right? Sadly, that is exactly what has happened, leading to devastating wars in 2009 and 2014, whose failure led in turn to the recent decision by Hamas to launch a series of human wave attacks against Israel proper. Since there is no state on earth that would allow its borders to be physically overrun by mobs including terrorists with explosives, the outcome of these attacks was clear: Hamas would lose.

To show its strength, Hamas was supposed to turn out several hundred thousand Gazans yesterday to rush the border and kill—or maim—Israeli civilians inside Israel. Instead, they turned out a mere forty thousand people—meaning that the majority of Hamas’ own membership in Gaza opted out of this insanity. By the gruesome calculus that Hamas has imposed on Palestinians and Israelis alike, the tactic of using innocent Gazans as human shields for attacks on Israel’s borders had proven to be a failure.

But Hamas won anyway, by giving the Western media the opportunity to juxtapose pictures of Donald Trump and his family with pictures of dead Palestinians. In exchange for those precious images, the media was more than happy to erase the facts that Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, that the attacks on Israel’s borders have been going on for weeks, or that Hamas is an evil, anti-Semitic, misogynist, homophobic, theocratic cult. The chance to bash Trump and demonize Israel was worth whitewashing any number of crimes —and the more Palestinians Hamas sent to die, the better the photo op.

Surely, no one could actually be that cynical and evil, right? Let *The New York Times* tell the story: “Israeli soldiers used tear gas and gunfire to keep Palestinian protesters from crossing the border fence with Gaza,” the Paper of Record reported to its 15 million followers on [Facebook](#), “killing at least 52 according to Palestinian officials. 40 miles away, officials celebrated the U.S. Embassy’s relocation to Jerusalem.” In case you missed the ever-so-subtle storyline, the post contained two photographs, one on top of the other, the first showing Palestinians crouching in a cloud of black smoke, the second Ivanka Trump pointing to the new building’s cornerstone, prominently featuring her father’s name.

The *Daily News* took the story a step further with allegations of causality: “Dozens of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces at Gaza border, thousands injured in protests over U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem,” read the [headline](#), cheerfully ignoring the fact that the “protests”—a troubling term for consistent assaults on a sovereign nation’s border orchestrated by a terrorist organization—have been going on for weeks now.

Even former CIA director John Brennan, who now spends his days on Twitter, bought in on the storyline of the day: “Deaths in Gaza result of utter disregard of Messers Trump & Netanyahu for Palestinian rights & homeland,” he [tweeted](#). “By moving Embassy to Jerusalem, Trump played politics, destroyed US peacemaker role. New generation of Israelis/Palestinians need to isolate extremists to find path to peace.”

It's not particularly surprising that Hamas, a murderous group that routinely uses civilians, including children, as human shields, would stage such a gruesome piece of theater, incentivizing tens of thousands of the citizens it had systemically robbed of a livelihood and a future by offering cash prizes to attack the Israeli border. But it is alarming that so many in the media and foreign policy establishment bought into this cynical and deadly provocation, pretending as if the riots had something to do with Trump and then chastising Israel for defending its borders from rioters who openly admitted that their goal was to randomly murder Jews. Were Hamas's far more deadly wars in 2009 and 2014 caused by Barack Obama? Of course not.

The position that the mobs attacking Israel's borders were "protesters" is an equally cynical lie. Just look at a snapshot of the day, as recorded by the IDF: Five explosive devices at 12:53 p.m.; another bombing attack five minutes later; six terrorists taking cover among the rioters at 1:15 p.m., opening fire at IDF soldiers; another shooting attack at 1:30 p.m., and another fifteen minutes later, this time by eight armed terrorists; three explosive devices detonated at 2:09 p.m. That's just one random hour out of the day. And it has nothing to do with anything save for Hamas's repeatedly stated desire to eliminate the Jewish state. To suggest otherwise is to ignore observable reality.

That so many of our elites still fall into a cheap propaganda trap set up by a terrorist cult is dispiriting, to say the least. That they further the goals of a terrorist organization by furnishing the backdrop to its macabre and murderous theater is deplorable. But after 2005, and 2009, and 2014, it has become increasingly hard to credit the idea that anyone involved on any side is naive about the nature and consequences of their actions.

What's truly disturbing about yesterday's events is the idea that they were theater. In other words, that the press knows exactly what it is doing—that news organizations are knowingly partnering with Hamas, and gladly whitewashing the crimes of a ghoulish leadership in return for pictures that they want as much as Hamas does, and that they are happy to pay for in uncritical coverage and free airtime.

That kind of cynicism, at the expense of Palestinian lives, is truly breathtaking, even for the Middle East. And it makes us all complicit.

Liel Leibovitz is a senior writer for Tablet Magazine.



COMMENT

PRINT

EMAIL

COMMENTS

[Click here for access to comments](#)

COMMENTING CHARGES

Daily rate: \$2

Monthly rate: \$18

Yearly rate: \$180

WAIT, WHY DO I HAVE TO PAY TO COMMENT?

Tablet is committed to bringing you the best, smartest, most enlightening and entertaining reporting and writing on Jewish life, all free of charge. We take pride in our community of readers, and are thrilled that you choose to engage with us in a way that is both thoughtful and thought-provoking. But the Internet, for all of its wonders, poses challenges to civilized and constructive discussion, allowing vocal—and, often, anonymous—minorities to drag it down with invective (and worse). Starting today, then, we are asking people who'd like to post comments on the site to pay a nominal fee—less a paywall than a gesture of your own commitment to the cause of great conversation. All proceeds go to helping us bring you the ambitious journalism that brought you here in the first place.

I NEED TO BE HEARD! BUT I DONT WANT TO PAY.

Readers can still interact with us free of charge via Facebook, Twitter, and our other social media channels, or write to us at letters@tabletmag.com. Each week, we'll select the best letters and publish them in a new letters to the editor feature on the Scroll.

We hope this new largely symbolic measure will help us create a more pleasant and cultivated environment for all of our readers, and, as always, we thank you deeply for your support.

MORE IN: [AMERICAN MEDIA](#) [GAZA](#) [HAMAS](#)



Syrian Cheese Sambusak

*See
Recipe*

| (Photo: Justin Covington)

Shavuot, a holiday where dairy meals are traditionally served at Jewish homes throughout the world, commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It falls 50 days after the planting of wheat on the second day of Passover; with crops, as well as wild greens and grass, appearing throughout March, April, and May, more food was available for goats and sheep to eat in the hot, dry Middle East by the time Shavuot came around. If the animals had more to eat, they produced more milk and thus, this became the holiday of cheese, cheesecakes, and cheese-filled pastries.

The custom spread throughout the world: In Russia, there are cheese blintzes; in Turkey, cheese burek; in the United States, cheesecakes; and in countries like Iraq and Syria, *sambusak*. Coming from the words *sanbosag* and *sanbusa* in Persian, the word itself means triangular, like a pocket pastry. Referred to as *sanbusak*, *sanbusaz*, or *sanbusaj* in Arabic cookbooks from the 10th to the 13th centuries, these savory pastries go way back in the Iraqi Jewish communities that eventually spread to Syria and India.

I like to make these pastries very small, serving some and freezing the others for unexpected guests. If you want, you can fill the pockets with dates or vegetables and cheese. The dough is very forgiving and *sambusak*, served warm and oozing with cheese, tastes absolutely delicious as a savory treat at Shavuot.

Sambusak



*

*Like this article? Sign up for our **Daily Digest** to get Tablet Magazine's new content in your inbox each morning.*

Joan Nathan is Tablet Magazine's food columnist and the author of 10 cookbooks including *King Solomon's Table: a Culinary Exploration of Jewish Cooking from Around the World*.



PRINT EMAIL

MORE IN: [DAIRY](#) [RECIPE](#) [SAMBUSAK](#) [SHAVUOT](#) [SHAVUOT FOOD](#) [SYRIAN JEWS](#)

VIDEO



| A still from 'Love, Gilda.' (Courtesy of the Estate of Gilda Radner)

When *Saturday Night Live* debuted in 1975, I was not old enough to watch. My parents were huge fans, though, and by the late '70s I was obsessed. I studied the show on videotape, giggled along with Steve Martin records, and repeatedly paged through the **scrapbook** *Saturday Night Live: Host, Francisco Franco*, an oversized green softcover from 1977 full of scribbled-on scripts and goofy behind-the-scenes photos.

But Gilda Radner was always my true love. I adored her mischievousness, her glee, her manic expressiveness, her pure commitment as she hurled herself onto her bed and into doors as **Judy Miller**, the tiny hostess of a one-woman show who wore a glamorous half-slip on her head. I loved **Roseanne Roseannadanna** (where the heck was “Fort Lee, New Jersey”? I had no clue, but when Roseanne Roseannadanna said Mr. Richard Feder lived there, it was hilarious!) and **Emily Litella** (“What’s all this fuss about saving Soviet jewelry? Where are we going to put it? I say keep it over there, with all their ballet dancers!”). I sang into a hairbrush on “**Goodbye Saccharin**,” along with slinky polyester-clad, feathered-haired Rhonda Weiss and the Rhondettes (“Oh they say you gave rats cancer/but I say that can’t be true/Because you are so very sweet/that’s something you’d never do”) and forced my little brother Andy to sing backup. (Don’t even get me started on “**Jewess Jeans**“.) Then there was Gilda’s album *Live From New York*; I memorized both “**Let’s Talk Dirty to the Animals**” (decades later performing it for my own children, who were scandalized) and “I Love to Be Unhappy” (“I love to be unhappy/I live to be in pain/When days are full of sunshine/I’m looking for the rain!”), aka the most Jewish song ever.

So I was thrilled to attend the premiere of the new documentary *Love, Gilda* at the Tribeca Film Festival last month. The movie is now playing the festival circuit (check upcoming dates on the movie's [Facebook page](#)) in advance of a theatrical release later this year, under the auspices of [Magnolia Pictures](#). *Love, Gilda* may be the first full-length commercial feature by director Lisa D'Apolito, but it feels hugely accomplished.

D'Apolito had great raw material: Radner kept extensive handwritten diaries, as well as journal entries on audiocassette. She was an inveterate letter writer (hence the movie's title, which appears in Radner's own loopy, attractive handwriting, animated on screen—by the end of the film, we've come to know it as well as a family member's). There are home movies of Radner as a hammy little kid and private videos of Radner with her husband, Gene Wilder, in the hospital toward the end of her life. The viewer knows, of course, that Radner died of ovarian cancer at the age of 42; it's both thrilling and painful to watch her in all her antic, wild-haired glory, an absolute force of nature, while knowing how little time she has.

The movie also reveals that Radner struggled with terrible eating disorders for almost her entire life. Born in 1946 to a well-off Jewish family in Detroit, she appears in black-and-white home movies as a chubby, cherubic, merry-looking little kid. Her slender, glamorous mother was distressed by Radner's weight and started her on Dexedrine when she was 10. Radner was a daddy's girl; her father took her to movies and touring productions of Broadway shows and was an eager, attentive audience for Radner's early comedic stylings. Little Gilda idolized Charlie Chaplin and Lucille Ball ("anyone who was willing to *risk it*," as she put it). When she was 12 her father developed a headache that turned out to be a brain tumor; he deteriorated rapidly and died two years later. Fortunately, Radner had Dibby, the family caregiver. ("My best friend is 53 years older than me," Radner wrote. "We live in the same house. She came when I was four months old and stayed for 18 years.") In home movies, Dibby gazes at Radner with utter love and amusement; we the audience feel huge relief and gratitude. "She says I'm striking," Radner notes in voice-over. Dibby teaches Radner to use comedy as a response to kids who mock her weight: "I made them laugh before they hurt me, before they said, 'Hey, you fat thing,'" she recalls. And Dibby became the inspiration for Emily Litella.

"When I think back on my life, I always felt that my comedy was just to make things be all right," Radner wrote in her journal. "I love the naiveté that the soul can believe what it wants to believe. I could be prettier than I was. I could be people that I really wasn't. I could use comedy to be in control of my situation." In the film, current comics—Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, Cecily Strong—take turns reading the diaries aloud. Melissa McCarthy is wide-eyed as she holds a loose-leaf binder: "Are these actually her papers? These are actually her...?" And suddenly she looks as though she's touching the Dead Sea Scrolls. The only male reader is [Bill Hader](#), which feels right; he's always seemed like the non-bro-est of comedians. "This is a real honor," he tells D'Apolito, with a shy smile. "Like, seriously... this is huge." It's evident how huge an influence Radner was.

When Tina Fey introduced the film in person at the festival, she choked up. "Lisa's film feels like a miracle to me," she told the audience. "It felt like I was getting to spend time with someone that I never knew, that I very much would have wanted to spend time with."

Radner's friends and relatives share their own stories about her in the film; we meet her brother Michael and hear from a few *SNL* castmates and writers, and from Gene Wilder's nephew, Jordan Walker-Pearlman. The most frequent talking heads, though, are her lifelong [friends](#) from [Camp](#)

Maplehurst, in 1955 Pam Katz Zakheim and Judy Glucklick Levy. I was relieved to learn how much she valued her friendships with women; Radner clearly wasn't one of those girls who likes to be the only girl in the room.

But a vast hunger for love of all kinds—romantic, platonic, and whatever you call love from an audience—was what drove her, as clichéd as that sounds. She dropped out of the University of Michigan for a guy, Canadian sculptor **Jeffrey Rubinoff**, whom she followed to Toronto. D'Apolito uncovered wonderful footage of Radner's first professional gig: a hyperenthusiastic production of *Godspell* that's nearly as hard to watch as the **one** in *Red Hot American Summer*, despite the presence in the Toronto version of Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin, Victor Garber, Martin Short, and Paul Shaffer. Short, who wound up dating Radner off and on for years starting when he was 22 and she was 26, recalled that she auditioned with “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” and was...not good. “She was very quick to tell us she was not a singer,” composer Stephen Schwartz recalls. “Which was accurate.”

Short expresses the frustration he felt toward Radner when they were together. “You have family money, everyone adores you, every guy falls in love with you, and every girl wants you to be your best friend...how could you be unhappy?” he asks. He pauses. “I wasn't sophisticated enough to understand that emotional uncertainty was valid.” Radner moved on to *Second City* in Toronto, and then the *National Lampoon Radio Hour*, and then to *SNL*, where she was the first person Lorne Michaels cast.

Radner cut a huge swath through her male coworkers (the movie doesn't dwell on this) but it wasn't until she met Wilder that she seemed to fall truly in love. “It felt like my life went from black and white to Technicolor,” she wrote. Part of me winced to watch her desperate pursuit of Wilder (taking up tennis because he liked sporty girls; learning French because he loved Paris; abandoning New York for Los Angeles to be with him), but Wilder also seemed to be a supportive adult in ways that her previous boyfriends weren't. “Gene took Gilda away from us,” Shaffer says flatly. “But we also were aware that she had physical problems and he was getting her taken care of.” In the film, Wilder's nephew talks about how Wilder taught Radner to enjoy eating for the first time. And when Radner was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer in 1986, Wilder was fully present.

In the movie, we spy on intimate moments in the hospital: Wilder bringing their tiny dog, Miss Sparkle Radner-Wilder, to the hospital in a tote bag, shaking the dog out onto the bed and waking Radner up with kisses and hugs as Miss Sparkle growls at the camera. Radner taking off her head wrap to reveal her patchy cropped hair and Wilder murmuring, “I love it like that.” And of course, after Radner's death, Wilder helped establish the **Gilda Radner Hereditary Cancer Program** and the **Gilda Radner Familial Ovarian Cancer Registry** to screen high-risk candidates (like Ashkenazi Jews) and to educate people about cancer's genetic component. He also helped create **Gilda's Club** in 1995; it eventually became part of the largest cancer support network in the country.

The film doesn't have a happy ending. How could it? Radner died on May 20, 1989. Her autobiography, *It's Always Something*, was published two weeks later. She died on a Saturday; Steve Martin was hosting *SNL* that night. He scrapped his monologue, and instead, in tears, introduced the clip of one of the greatest moments in *SNL* history: the 1978 **sketch** based on Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse movie *The Band Wagon*, in which Radner and Martin spot each other across a crowded disco and come together in a dance that's both ridiculous and romantic. It's uncomfortable, awkward, tender, physical, sexy and hilarious. It's perfectly Gilda.

*Like this article? Sign up for our **Daily Digest** to get Tablet Magazine's new content in your inbox each morning.*

*Marjorie Ingall is a columnist for Tablet Magazine, and **author** of Mamaleh Knows Best: What Jewish Mothers Do to Raise Successful, Creative, Empathetic, Independent Children.*



[PRINT](#) [EMAIL](#)

MORE IN: [DOCUMENTARY](#) [GENE WILDER](#) [GILDA RADNER](#) [SNL](#)

Tablet

ARTS & CULTURE

Books
Fiction
Film
The Internet
Music
Television
Theater & Dance
Visual Art & Design

LIFE & RELIGION

Observance
Food
Family
Personal History
Notebook

NEWS & POLITICS

United States
Middle East
World
Sports

THE SCROLL

UNORTHODOX
ABOUT US
CONTACT
NEXTBOOK PRESS

Tablet Magazine is a project of Nextbook Inc.

Copyright © 2018 Nextbook Inc. All rights reserved. | [Terms of Service & Privacy Policy](#) | [Site by Superfame](#)